

# Astrology and Alchemy

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# **Alchemy and Astrology**

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## **Introduction**

Our aim in this article is to explore the connection between modern day astrology and the medieval discipline of alchemy. Delving into the alchemical vat of centuries of writings and reflections has been somewhat daunting. It remains a work in progress. Our ability to focus this discussion was helped by Jung's ideas on the *unus mundus* and synchronicity, and by framing it within a Jungian outlook. Curiously, the seeds of what now are being supported by the theories of quantum physics are also found in these alchemical writings. We were excited to find that our study of the ancient alchemical texts has lead us to modern thought leaders who herald the coming of a new cosmological world view that embraces the alchemical and the astrological. It would seem that human beings are on the verge of a significant shift in consciousness. Several people commenting on this include Richard Tarnas in his book Cosmos and Psyche<sup>1</sup>. Rick Levine in his DVD 'Quantum Astrology'<sup>2</sup> makes connections between astrology and quantum physics and the new direction in which astrology is poised to move. He also refers to the infrared and ultraviolet spectrum which will be discussed later in connection with Jung. Yet another person, Veronica Goodchild<sup>3</sup> in her article in a recent Spring Journal speaks to the reunion of psyche and matter which the alchemical experiments where designed to facilitate when she writes:

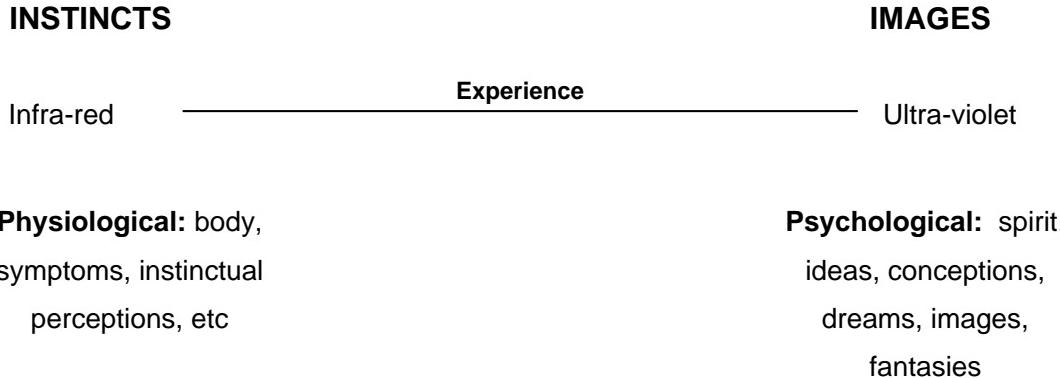
“ . . . the new coordinates of reality (in addition to our achievements in rational consciousness) include the reunion of psyche and matter as a One world, the erosion of ordinary time and space, the participation of the individual in creating reality, the movement toward the *Kairos* or the right or ‘propitious moment’, the notion of *creation continua*, continuing creation, that arises out of a reciprocal, ongoing relationship between the individual and the *unus mundus*, . . . ”<sup>4</sup>

It is the theories of Carl Jung and his psychology where a significant link can be found. His substantial contribution was in the application of the alchemical ideas to the process of psychological and spiritual development. It is in the archetypal realm where this link can be understood and which provides a theoretical framework for understanding the point where alchemy, astrology and the practical applications to our practice of psychological astrology meet.

In the later years of Jung's theory, archetypes and psychic life took the form of a spectrum. His early theory of archetypes was as pre-existing patterns that is *a priori* in the human psyche. Archetypes are inherited structuring patterns in the psyche according to Jung. His first definition of archetype focused on primordial universal imagery that arose out of the collective unconscious. In his later life, Jung expanded on his work and added the "psychoid" dimension to archetypes. In this conception of archetypes, the archetypal level of the unconscious has properties that are in common with the organic and physiological world as well as the psychological and world of images. The psychological and the physiological worlds can be seen as two sides of the same coin. At one end of the spectrum is the infra-red pole where the physical instincts and the physiological world reside. At the other end of the spectrum is the spiritual or imagery where the psychological lives.

In "*On the Nature of the Psyche*" , Jung writes:

"The dynamism of instinct is lodged as it were in the infra-red part of the spectrum whereas the instinctual image is lies in the ultra-violet part . . . the realization and assimilation of instinct never take place at the red end i.e. by absorption into the instinctual sphere but only through integration of the image which signifies and at the same time evokes the instinct, although in a form quite different from the one we meet on the biological level"<sup>5</sup>



It is this metaphor that can help to understand the connection between astrology and alchemy within the context of psychological astrology. At one end of the archetypal spectrum is the instinctive or physical world leading all the way up to the imaginal world of dreams and images at the other end. It is our opinion that alchemy provides the philosophical ground for the connection between the sky and the earthly plane. Looking at astrology along this spectrum means that individual expressions of planets acting in a natal chart or by transit can manifest at various points along the spectrum - instinctively in the body, an event as described by horary or mundane astrology or as a psychological experience. It is our contention that this perspective can also be tied to the full range of the astrological world, allowing horary and predictive approaches to blend with psychological ones.

## What is Alchemy

Alchemy is a combination of physics, chemistry, metallurgy, medicine, astrology and the mystic sciences. The word itself derives from an Arabic word which means “the art of producing elixir or the philosopher’s stone”. It also means the substance or medium of transmutation of baser metals into gold by some magical means.

There are a number of alchemical traditions throughout history. Some are more spiritual, esoteric and mystical in nature. Other traditions are more practical and concerned with the actual chemical reactions. These are the traditions that were the earliest attempts to understand the mystery of material phenomenon in nature.

The Golden age of alchemy was in the Renaissance, a period of significant revolution in ideas of humanism, arts, classics, and Christianity. It was during this time that alchemy was connected to more religious and magical thought.

By the 18th century, the actual connection between chemistry and alchemy dissolved, and the spiritual and mystical traditions were fostered by healers, astrologers and poets. 18th century alchemists believed that they were studying the unknown phenomenon in matter; they observed what they saw and then interpreted what they saw. Many believed that the true purpose of alchemy was to produce medicine or heal the body.

The Opus or the work of alchemy was considered a sacred task where the alchemist searched for the supreme and ultimate value that came from working with the prima material towards the Philosopher's Stone. In Latin, it was known as the *philosophi lapis*, a legendary substance that supposedly could turn inexpensive metals into gold and/or create an elixir that would make humans younger, thus delaying death. It was a long-time "holy grail" of Western alchemy. In the view of spiritual alchemy, making the philosopher's stone would bring enlightenment upon the maker and conclude the Great Work.

The opus was considered to be a highly individual work, the alchemists were decidedly solitary individuals, and it involved a certain amount of mystery. Liz Greene writes of the purpose of the alchemy this way:

“The underlying theme of alchemy is not really about making gold. It concerns transforming the raw substance of human nature and releasing its potential for inner divinity, not through repression or transcendence but through inner confrontation and integration”<sup>6</sup>

The Opus was divided into four stages: nigredo, albedo, citrion or yellowing and the rubedo.

**Nigredo:** Often the nigredo was associated with the prima materia, the base material, the substance with which the alchemical processes were applied. Its image is black or chaos or the massa confusa. Psychologically, this corresponds to depression, dark night of the soul or consumed by any overwhelming emotion.

Albedo: Once the prima materia has been subjected to a number of chemical operations. It is moves from blackness to whiteness. This is the state of purification. The prima materia is no longer contaminated and is in a purer stage. From a psychological point of view, this is the state of psychological insight and the movement along the spectrum to image and insight. The individual no longer projects the planet expression on the outside world but begins to accept and own the planet's expression as part of oneself.

Citrian or Yellowing : The colour yellow in the alchemical stages signifies change for the worse. This stage reflects the processes of fall, aging, old teeth, and old paper. The alchemists spoke of the putrefaction and/or corruption at this point in the Opus. However, the yellow is also the colour of ripening grains, spring flowers, honey, sunlight, and gold and therefore consciousness.

Rubedo: This stage is the red stage and is the final (4th) stage in the alchemical process. This is the place where spiritual or psychological insight is fixed and integrated into oneself. The texts refer to the need to make the outcome of the process durable so that it is always present. The alchemists referred to the state where they accepted their spiritual inheritance; it would also reflect a state of integration. Psychologically, it reflects the point where an individual has mastered the prima materia and the material world

## **History of Alchemy**

Zosimus of Panopolis, a fourth century alchemical apologist, considered by many to be the father of alchemy, suggests that alchemy is at the core of an ancient pre-deluge science, one that was revealed to mankind through sexual contact with semi-divine entities.

The earliest surviving alchemical manuscript, "Isis the Prophetess to Her Son Horus" found in the Codex Marcianus, a medieval (11th century) collection of Greek fragments. This work reflects a unique blend of Hebrew mysticism and Egyptian mythology that could only have come from Alexandria early in the first century of the Christian Era.

The text describes that in the town of Hermes, the town of the holy technique, ISIS was studying angelic magick and alchemy. She was met by an angel who wished to unite with her sexually. She refused to submit and asked him for the secret to prepare gold and silver. The next day a higher order angel appears, ISIS agrees to exchange sex for the alchemical secret but she must take an oath to never reveal the secret to anyone except her son Horus. The text goes on to describe extensive lab work in melting and preparing metals such as quicksilver, copper, lead and of course gold.

ISIS was a great enchantress, the goddess of magic. Together with Thoth, she taught mankind the secrets of medicine. Her name means Queen of the Throne, or Queen of Heaven. For almost 3,500 years, she was the main Egyptian Goddess. As the wife and sister of Osiris and the mother of Horus, she was the personification of the faithful wife and devoted mother.

This text identifying the origins of alchemy is important because it is the first mention of the concept of Kairos. The term comes from Greek Alchemy and means the right moment for the “metamorphosis of the gods”. Kairos is much different from chronos or regular time; it has a qualitative nature. It reflects the point of connection between the divine realm and the human / corporal realm, that is, the point where psyche and matter meet.

In the New Testament Kairos means "the appointed time in the purpose of God", the time when God acts (e.g. Mark 1.15, the Kairos is fulfilled). There is the connection to “divine time” or God’s time

This early text is also important for several other reasons. It reveals that the alchemical knowledge has a divine source and that it is a gift of the gods or the angels. Because of this divine source, alchemy is a form of secret knowledge and not available to just anyone.

## As Above / So Below

Our premise is that alchemy is the art/science that connects psychology and mundane life through the understanding of astrology. It is the thing that connects all life from the movement of the stars in heaven right down to our dream world and the unconscious. This belief in the unity of all existence is captured in the alchemical phrase “as above, so below” found in The Emerald Tablet. (see Figure 1)<sup>7</sup>. This notion was picked up by Jung in his theories of synchronicity and now prominently felt in the speculations of the new sciences.



The Emerald Tablet is said to have originated from the Cosmic messenger himself – Hermes and placed in King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. It was supposedly found by various historical figures that discovered Hermes Tomb. However, the origins of the Tablet are mysterious.

### Text of The Emerald Tablet

Truly, without Deceit, certainly and absolutely —

That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above corresponds to that which is Below, in the accomplishment of the Miracle of One Thing. And just as all things have come from One, through the Mediation of One, so all things follow from this One Thing in the same way.

Its Father is the Sun. Its Mother is the Moon. The Wind has carried it in his Belly. Its Nourishment is the Earth. It is the Father of every completed Thing in the whole World. Its Strength is intact if it is turned towards the Earth. Separate the Earth by Fire: the fine from the gross, gently, and with great skill.

It rises from Earth to Heaven, and then it descends again to the Earth, and receives Power from Above and from Below. Thus you will have the Glory of the whole World. All Obscurity will be clear to you. This is the strong Power of all Power because it overcomes everything fine and penetrates everything solid.

In this way was the World created. From this there will be amazing Applications, because this is the Pattern. Therefore am I called Thrice Greatest Hermes, having the three parts of the Wisdom of the whole World.

Herein have I completely explained the Operation of the Sun.

The Tablet is the oldest hermetic text known to exist and it has influenced and inspired 3500 years of alchemical writing. Outwardly, the lines of the text reveal the recipe for the preparation of the Philosopher's stone and the transmutation of the baser metals into Gold. The importance to our discussion is that the Tablet has been used to justify astrology as a vital part of alchemy.

The text supports the premise of a *unus mundus* – one world – where the alchemical opus is considered a cosmic process and that the physical, mental, and spiritual worlds exist simultaneously in a unified view of reality. That is, the empirical world of human beings and nature exist against a transcendental background. It is this background that emerges into consciousness through synchronistic happenings.

There are several levels of consciousness within this concept. At the lowest level of consciousness, there is no distinction between the self and the world. Like Levy Bruhl's notion of *participation mystique*, there is instead a mystical connection with the world where the ego perceives and participates in an intelligent universe. Human beings and nature participated in one world.

The return of “as above, so below” in modern thought is spoken of in Richard Tarnas’s book Cosmos and Psyche<sup>8</sup> and the recent film What the Bleep.<sup>9</sup> These two pieces advance the hypothesis that the same phenomenon exists between human beings and the universe. However, at a level of consciousness that goes beyond *participation mystique*, the ego is aware that it is participating in an intelligent universe and uses the astrological frame to observe the unfolding of its life.

Jung says of the Unus Mundus

“Our psyche is set up in accord with the structure of the universe, and what happens in the macrocosm likewise happens in the infinitesimal and most subjective reaches of the psyche”<sup>10</sup>

Liz Greene speaks of the psychoid reality in this way:

“It is this perspective that we need to remember if we are to penetrate the oddities of the alchemical writings. But for that matter, we need to keep this perspective when we deal with astrology too, because what we call a planetary influence can express itself on a bodily level, as an external event, as an inner emotional or spiritual state, as an ideology, as another person with whom we engage in relationship, or an any combination of these diverse levels.”<sup>11</sup>

## Astrology and Alchemy

The study of astrology and alchemy has been linked throughout history or throughout time. The word ‘time’ being a deliberately chosen word as we will see that one of the core elements used by both astrology and alchemy is the concept of timing. Astrology and alchemy are similar in other ways too - they are both concerned with ingredients, correlations, operations

and states. Just the language and sky scape is different. Astrology uses the study of the energy of the planets in the sky and its corresponding impact on the earth and the people who live thereon; alchemy with required steps and operations is concerned with turning of base metals into gold. Whether this is real gold as used by some alchemists from a chemical perspective or metaphorical gold used by psychologists depends to a large extent on the geographic location the alchemical tradition originated. Many astrologers through the ages were also alchemists.

Dr. John Dee, astrologer to Queen Elizabeth 1, as an example.

It is the traditional planets, that is, the seven known planets visible to the naked eye that links alchemy to astrology. These planets are correlated to the metals that the alchemists used in their operations. The alchemists believe that each of these planets dominated or ruled certain metals. An example of exactly how interrelated these two forms of study can be seen in the symbols used by alchemists. The Alchemists Handbook (Manual for Practical Laboratory Alchemy) by Frater Albertus,<sup>12</sup> gives 7 pages of listings of symbols used the Rosicrucian Fraters. Amongst the many symbols of chemical substances (metals such as lead, tin; minerals & operations lay neatly interspersed the glyphs for elements, planets, the astrological signs & timing.

If we dig deeper into the specific connections between the metals used in alchemy and the planets used in astrology, we see the following were used:

- The Sun rules Gold (☉)
- The Moon, Silver (☽)
- Mercury, Mercury (☿)
- Venus, Copper (♀)
- Mars, Iron (♂)
- Jupiter, Tin (♃)
- Saturn, Lead (♄)

The Alchemists further refine some of these correlations giving different symbolism for different states of the metals. e.g. refined mercury, solid mercury, & pure mercury (or quicksilver).

As Astrologers, our whole way of thinking is centred on the use of glyphs as a shorthand. For those willing to make the foray into alchemy it can give us an instant resonance with the alchemical subject, particularly when the glyphs that we are so familiar with are liberally sprinkled therein.

### **Is this of any practical use to us as astrologers today?**

Can there be any benefit from recombining the two forms, so integrated in the past and yet increasingly divergent in more recent times? In essence, is there a way to recapture the synergy between the two arts/sciences and use them to create a product that is greater than the sum of the parts. We believe the answer is a resounding Yes, if you view Astrology and Alchemy as Divining tools with a common goal, and if you place both disciplines on Jung's archetypal spectrum discussed earlier.

One part of the alchemical process was to depict what was going on by a series of woodcuts or illustrations. The one that follows is Emblem 42 of Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* in 1617.

<sup>13</sup> This particular image shows the role of the alchemist; it could just as easily apply to the astrologer. In fact, if we explore this further we can see that each discipline whether it be astrology, alchemy or many other divine or spiritual forms resonate with this:



Nature and creativity seen here in the form of a divine female force lead the way. The alchemist/astrologer follows along tracking her footsteps. He (reason and experience) is seen here wearing the Spectacles of detection and carrying the Lamp of illumination and a Stick of divination as he sets off to walk down the path.

### **Practical connections between Astrology, Alchemy and Psychology**

The key element in alchemy for the transformation of *prima materia*, i.e. the transformation of the baser parts of the personality, is to have a sealed alembic container. It is the hermetic sealing that ensures that the subject of the alchemical opus remains contained and not contaminated from outside influences. From our perspective, the alembic container in astrology is the birthchart. Inside the birthchart for an individual person or event is all the raw potential or chaos at that one particular moment in time, the *prima materia* of the alchemical world. Within this sealed container is the composition of planetary energies in primal form. This is the starting point. Then, just as in the alchemical world, the aim is to bring these energies into order, raising the vibrations by a series of operations over future, pré-determined moments in time, until the essence becomes distilled into a purer form or essence. This movement over time shows a close correlation to the evolving or unfolding of a birth chart by any of the generally accepted trending techniques – transits, secondary progressions, solar arcs. Each has a time where it is beneficial or in fact where it is required that we work with the

different planetary energies. Thus, *Kairos* becomes a key component in the transformation within individual lives. And, if we accept this connection, it opens up a whole new area and richness of depth of exploration for the astrologer.

In transits, for example, we know that Saturn is one of our timers, making a square aspect to the natal position roughly every 7 years and returning to its actual natal position for the first time around the age of 28. Saturn is concerned with issues of growing up, taking responsibility and our ability to function and take our place in the outside world. Assuming a life span of around 84 years, an individual will usually get the opportunity of having three Saturn returns during the course of their life. In alchemy, Saturn also plays an important role. It rules Lead, the base or starting material. The aim in alchemy is to apply a series of operations over time, by which it will be turned into Gold, ruled by the Sun. Alchemical processes are repeated time upon time, each time trying to perfect a little more of the base metal into gold. Saturn is the original dark. Sun the point of illumination. We cannot have light without dark and the interaction between the two over time conjures up some interesting images. One brings the dark of not knowing, the other the total light or the potential for illumination and within that spectrum an uneasy mix where both are engaged in a battle to reign supreme. This can be compared in astrological terms to the times of important Saturn transits, particularly those in connection to the Sun, the ever present light and warmth in the sky towards which we, as a true, unique individual in our own right are always being drawn.

According to Liz Greene<sup>14</sup>, Saturn is also the glue that binds, connecting us to other important people who will have an impact on us and bringing them into our lives at predetermined times in the role of fate.

A cursory study of any of the alchemical texts, as well as denoting Saturn and the Sun (Sol) will also show representations of other planetary bodies. Of particular importance to us, as astrologers, are the Moon (Luna) and the Sun(Sol). The interplay between the Sun and the Moon in the astrological birthchart as the potential for ways to integrate the inner masculine and feminine, can be contemplated when linking them to the various alchemical images depicting the interrelationship between Sol and Luna. In a similar vein, any of the Planets

shown in the images also show at an archetypal level the ways in which specific energies can interact and relate, with the potential to add a further richness to our astrological knowledge.

The comparison of the birthchart used in astrology to the alembic container or flask used in alchemy is also an interesting one. The alembic and its contents have to be sealed. As a circle the birthchart also has that innate quality.

In some forms of alchemy, alchemists worked in pairs. A man and a woman would work together, one acting as witness to the other. This can be compared to the role of client and astrologer, analyst or indeed any significant relationship which has the potential to act as a catalyst for development and growth in a person's life.

### **Who is the master behind the unfolding of the process?**

Is it the alchemist or the astrologer because they are in possession of tools and knowledge that can be used to orchestrate in some fashion, events of the future? Or is it the greater consciousness of the outer planets working in the cycles of their own cosmic time, being connected at just the right moment by the spirit or spark of Eros, Mercury or Hermes Trismegistus? Certainly without the alchemist or astrologer, there is no witness. What is being called for is some form of divine cooperation between the earth and the heavens, a true linking of 'as above, so below'. So an important role for the astrology/alchemy is in whatever way possible to act in this capacity of witness. Witnesses are an important part of any individual's move for psychological growth – whether it is through the dynamics of human relationships, or the more structured route of therapy. Adding the astrologer in to this mix correctly places our role.

So how can we, as Astrologers, enter this alchemical world which opens up for us a tantalizing but potentially huge new arena of study? And why now?

We cannot ignore the rising tide that we referred to at the beginning of our article – there is much recent interest and talk about topics such as quantum physics, unified forces, interactive

fields and the interconnectedness of all things. This is not surprising to any astrologer. In our minds, everything always has been connected. But what is exciting is that the world is moving in that direction too and, moreover, is starting to accept it. We are one step ahead though – as astrologers we have been putting this knowledge into practical use throughout many thousands of years. But we cannot ignore the subject of alchemy which has accompanied astrology along this journey. There is a potential richness for any astrologer to be able to add to their existing knowledge through an exploration of alchemy, an art/science intertwined with ours throughout time. But the scope is huge. We have tried to show in this article one potential point of entry through psychology and that is through the work of Jung

We leave you with a quote from Marie-Louise von Franz<sup>15</sup> acknowledging the need for psychology and science to come together to create a joint future.

To clarify these creative possibilities, we would have to have a group of physicists who are willing to take on a deep Jungian analysis – not because we want to rule them or influence them – simply that they learn. And then we would have to have a few Jungian analysts who would take the trouble to study physics. I think that's what first would have to be done, so that both knew really deeply the other subject.

The same can be said to apply to astrologers.

#### About the Authors:

Christina Becker is a Diplomate Jungian Analyst from the C.G. Jung Institute in Zurich Switzerland. In addition to her Jungian training, she has studied astrology at the Faculty of Astrological Studies in London, England, and with Liz Greene through the Astrodeinst seminars in Zurich. She teaches Counselling Skills for Astrologers through the Canadian Association of Astrological Education, and is a practicing astrologer. Christina is a clinical member of the Ontario Society of Psychotherapists, the Association of Graduate Analytical Psychologists, and the International Association for Analytical Psychology. She is also the author of *The Heart of The Matter: Individuation as an Ethical Process*. She can be contacted through her website [www.cjbecker.com](http://www.cjbecker.com)

Janet Markham emigrated to Toronto, Canada from England over 25 years ago. She is a full time astrology teacher who also has her own individual client base. She is one of the founder members of the Canadian Association of Astrological Education [www.thecaae.com](http://www.thecaae.com). This organization was established in 1993 to provide a formal structure for students and teachers in the study of astrology. Examinations are held twice a year in May and November across Canada. Janet is currently serving as the President of the Association. She can be contacted through her website at [www.janetmarkham.com](http://www.janetmarkham.com)

<sup>1</sup> Richard Tarnas (2006) *Cosmos and Psyche*. New York, Penguin Group.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Levine(2005) *Quantum Astrologys: Science, Spirit and Our Place in the Cycles of History*

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Goodchild (2006) “Psychoid. Psychophysical, P-Subtle: Alchemy and A New World View” in *Alchemy* Spring Journal 74: A Journal of Archetype and Culture. New Orleans, Spring Journal.

<sup>4</sup> Goodchild. Pg 65-66.

<sup>5</sup> Carl Jung. (1946) “*On the Nature of the Psyche*” in CW Vol 8. The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche. Para 414.

<sup>6</sup> Liz Greene. (1988) “*Alchemical Symbolism in the Horoscope*” in Dynamics of the Unconscious. York Beech, Maine: Simon Waisser Publications, 1988)

<sup>7</sup> Source for Emerald Tablet and quotation.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Tarnas (2006) op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> What the Bleep do we know? The movie (2004)

<sup>10</sup> Carl Jung. (1946) “*On the Nature of the Psyche*” in CW Vol 8. The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche.

<sup>11</sup> Liz Green (1988) op. cit. page 258.

<sup>12</sup> Frater Albertus (1974) *The Alchemist’s Handbook (Manual for Practical Laboratory Alchemy* Weiser pages 58 - 64

<sup>13</sup> Michael Maier (1617) *Atalanta fugiens*

<sup>14</sup> Liz Greene & James Hillman (2005) One Day Seminar ‘*The Alchemical Sky*’

<sup>15</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz. (von Franz 1992 Page 162)